



with their lives – a very vulnerable time sexually’.

Putting their lives on ‘hold’

Research had shown that these young women ‘pretty much suspend personal responsibility until they become somebody and do something with their lives’.

Harrison said loveLife would focus on school leavers entering into this ‘state of limbo’, with messages that who they became in the future very much depended on what they did today.

Studies in KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo showed that the need for physical and material security was a major issue at these ages. Women sought personal affirmation and traded sex for ‘so-called protection’ from older men while their families expected

them to grow up and bring food to the table in virtually jobless environments. Affirmation in a community often also came through being a mother. Other big HIV/AIDS drivers were the levels of violence and the tolerance of coercion.

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LoveLife also spreads its face-to-face programme (70% of the budget) through 690 ‘hubs’ (in clinics, NGOs or schools) across the country. Peter Babcock-Walters, Director of the Mobile Task

Team based at the Health Economics and HIV/AIDS Research Division at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, likened the interruption of the Khomanani campaign to the interruption of antiretroviral treatment. He described the tender debacle as ‘absolutely inane – you can’t interrupt a flow of information when it’s supposed to be in support of a national ARV roll-out’.

He was backed by internationally acclaimed HIV/AIDS researcher and campus colleague Professor Jerry Coovadia, who labelled it ‘recurring incompetence and inefficiency in handling critical but straightforward managerial elements for the control of the AIDS epidemic’.

Chris Bateman

THE LOVELIFE-SAVING ‘RIPPLE EFFECT’ – GROUNDBREAKERS SEED HOPEFUL ATTITUDES



Maria Jandam of Orange Farm, Gauteng.

Maria Jandam’s story...

For a pregnant teenager, dropped out of school and living in the midst of

rampant alcoholism and dire poverty on Orange Farm (a squatter township in Gauteng), being turned down for a job can be the straw that breaks the camel’s back.

With her hopes shattered, it was a loveLife billboard proclaiming, ‘It’s not the end of your world’, that pulled Maria Jandam from the brink of despair and into becoming a loveLife HIV/AIDS prevention campaign ‘groundbreaker’.

In 1999 Maria, then 17, left school to have her baby, her head ringing with the voices of teachers and community members telling her she had destroyed her future. She shared a shack with her mother, employed as a domestic worker and four siblings, one a sister who doubled as a family caregiver. After giving birth Maria resolved that she would prove the predictions wrong and returned to school.

‘From an early age it was clear to me that, just like my sister, I would never be able to go on to tertiary education. I guess I’d already decided that fulfilment in life would come through being a mother. In retrospect, my incentive to finish school was not as strong as my desire to have a baby,’ she says.

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Yet the pregnancy marked a watershed in her life, forcing her to decide what she wanted to be. ‘I never got a chance to explore, or go to parties, or just be like other young people. At



the same time, I learnt that you can find good things even in a bad situation. Having a baby taught me to be focused and responsible. I said to myself: "Maria, you should wake up and get a job after grade 12."

She went back to school, but her child was sickly and she missed so many classes that she dropped out again. It was then that a friend introduced her to loveLife and she enrolled in its motivational and healthy sexuality programmes. LoveLife's groundbreakers urged her to go back to school yet again. This time she matriculated in 2002.

The following year, she unsuccessfully applied to be a 'Cyber-Y's groundbreaker', introducing young people to the power of computers. 'I was shattered and it was hard to convince me that it was not the end of my world – until I saw that billboard'. A young male friend began teaching her ballroom dancing at the loveLife Y-Centre in Orange Farm and she began teaching Latin dance at a school for mentally handicapped children.

'But after a while I didn't want to do it anymore. I was horrified to find that not all these children were handicapped from birth, but had been damaged through rape and other forms of physical abuse.'

'I thought I had it tough until I heard their life stories and realised that I was not the worst case. I had to face my own situation before I could go back,' Maria said. In 2004 she re-applied to be a groundbreaker, and this time was successful. Six months later she was told that she had extraordinary information technology skills and was appointed as a desktop support engineer. 'It took some getting used to, everyone saying thank you to me when I sorted their problems out,' she smiles proudly.

Then in October 2005, she became a call centre counsellor. 'Working with young people is the greatest dream for me. I can speak from experience. My work is to help other teenagers avoid pregnancy, but I also encourage those who have had a baby to complete their

education. I tell them that you alone determine the person you become. You can choose how you respond to things.'

'Working with young people is the greatest dream for me. I can speak from experience.'

Her daughter is 7 and entering grade 3 next year. 'I may not be able to give her every opportunity in life, but she is growing up knowing that she's an achiever. When she is a teenager, her horizons will be much brighter than mine were. I believe that her passion to reach her goals will be much stronger than her desire to have a baby right then. As for me, I am happy'.

Abigail's story...



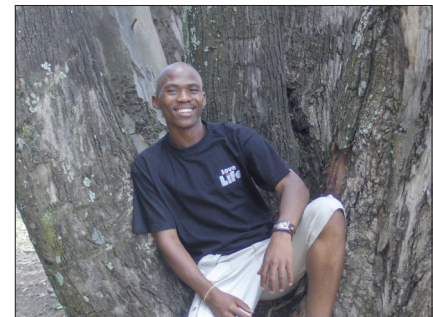
Abigail Bambisa of Nkowakowa village, Limpopo.

Bambisa comes from a small village in Limpopo called Nkowakowa. Her difficult home circumstances and education in an under-resourced rural school meant that she just scraped matric with little prospect of employment. But her determination and strong leadership skills were recognised and in 2001 she was chosen as a loveLife groundbreaker in the Nkowakowa youth-friendly clinic.

'She passed with flying colours and was accepted into the University of Cape Town's Medical School in 2003.'

Her year with loveLife changed her forever. She became one of loveLife's strongest public speakers and community activists, and when she graduated she was so motivated that she returned to school to repeat her final year. She passed with flying colours and was accepted into the University of Cape Town's Medical School in 2003. Now in her 4th year of medicine, Abigail remains committed to her community and the health of all South Africans. She's part of the leadership of a Born Free Generation.

Sandile Tsie's story...



Sandile Tsie of Kwa-Thema, East Rand.

Four years ago Sandile locked himself in the bathroom and tied a rope around the roof beam. He climbed onto the toilet seat and put the rope around his neck.

'I looked in the mirror and despised myself. My mother had noticed me going into the bathroom and when I took a long time to emerge, she knocked. I did not reply so she looked in the window and screamed when she saw me standing on the seat. My uncle broke in and calmed me down. Looking back, I am very grateful for my mother's concern at the time. Unfortunately, she died two months later.'

Sandile grew up in Kwa-Thema on the East Rand in a home where liquor was king. There was always alcohol, but there was often no food. 'When I was hungry, I would wait for one of my friends to invite me home. At other times, finding nothing on the table, I would go begging for 50c or a rand to buy some bread for supper. The last straw was when I got kicked out of class



for not having a math book costing R7. My father had said that there was just no money, but when I got home, I saw the tenant who lived in an outside room hand over R100 to my Dad. I exploded because I knew the R100 was to buy liquor. My mother tried to comfort me, but she too drank and the rage just kept boiling inside me. It was after that that I tried to hang myself’.

The year before he started smoking and drinking alcohol, using money he made as a sweet seller at school. He failed grade 10 twice in successive years. ‘The funny thing was that I couldn’t see that I was behaving just like my father. It was my sister Sibongile who brought this to my attention. Sibongile, in her RDP house with two small children, is my inspiration. She’s not rich, but she’s got a really positive attitude to life. I wanted to be like her, someone that people could turn to.’

Then a Christian-based organisation called Youth Connection, based in Kwa-Thema, introduced ‘loveLifestyle’ to his school in 2004. The programme trained pupils to run motivational and healthy sexuality programmes.

Sandile’s outlook began shifting. ‘I started to value God and education – my last year at secondary school was marvellous. I completed grade 12, the first in our family and later received certificates in public relations and leadership and was class captain.’

My father had said that there was just no money, but when I got home, I saw the tenant who lived in an outside room hand over R100 to my Dad. I exploded because I knew the R100 was to buy liquor.

He became the best poet for Kwa-Thema Secondary Schools in 2004 when he was recognised as best student in Laban Motlabi Comprehensive School. Springs Rotary Club awarded him a book voucher and he bought second-hand copies of *Maxwell Leadership 101*, *Theatre in Old Times* and *The Long Walk to Freedom*.

‘In reading Madiba’s story, I suddenly realised that I was prisoner to my own anger, jailed inside myself. I can now look in the mirror, proud of what I

have overcome and determined that my adult life will be different from the experiences of my family. I can now honestly say that I love and esteem my mother and father’.

In 2005 he became a loveLife *mpintshi* (friend), moving up within another year to become a groundbreaker and youth coach. He is now part of an outreach team into schools in a community hard-hit by the effects of alcohol and drugs. ‘I know what I’m talking about and can connect with others from similar circumstances’.

‘In reading Madiba’s story, I suddenly realised that I was prisoner to my own anger, jailed inside myself.’

His ambition is to be an author ‘so that I can inspire people through my writings and enable future generations to make South Africa a better country. Like my sister, I want to be a source of love and support’.

Chris Bateman